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ABSTRACT

Statistics on the literacy skills of America's children reveal that approximately 40% of students across the nation cannot read at a basic level. And for low-income students, the figure is even worse. In response to this situation, a number of efforts are underway--spearheaded by federal and state policymakers and a number of independent organizations--to remedy the situation. This Digest looks at some of the most recent of those initiatives. The Digest first discusses the importance of the findings of the National Reading Panel in the development of Reading First, the literacy component of President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" Act (2001). It then discusses several state initiatives, such as the Texas Reading Initiative and the Alabama Reading Initiative. Finally, the Digest cites several literacy initiatives launched by independent nonprofit organizations, such as "Success for All, the "Children's Literacy Initiative," the "NCTE Reading Initiative," and "Born to Read." (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

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By

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and
Family Learning Association

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Recent Reading Initiatives:

Examples of National, State, and Professional Organizations' Efforts

by Shawna Brynildssen

Statistics on the literacy skills of America's children reveal a disturbing situation. Approximately 40 percent of students across the nation cannot read at a basic level. And for low-income students, the figure is much worse (No Child Left Behind, 2002). In response to this situation, a number of efforts are underway—spearheaded by federal and state policymakers and a number of independent organizations—to remedy the situation. This Digest looks at some of the most recent of those initiatives.

Federal Efforts

In 1997, Congress asked the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to form a panel to review and evaluate the various approaches used in reading instruction. The National Reading Panel (NRP) conducted a two-year study in which panel members reviewed over one hundred thousand studies on how students learn to read. The panel also held a series of open panel and regional meetings to gather input from policymakers, educators, and parents across the nation.

The NRP's findings were published in April of 2000, and identified what the panel believed to be the most important components of reading instruction. These were alphabetics (both phonemic awareness and phonics instruction), fluency, comprehension, teacher education, and computer technology.

The findings of the NRP report were important in the development of Reading First, the literacy component of President Bush's 2001 "No Child Left Behind" Act. Reading First is a state grant program that will provide some $6 billion over the next several years to fund scientifically based reading-improvement efforts. The funds will be awarded to programs that teach the following five key early reading skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The first grants were awarded in August of 2002 to be used for the 2002-2003 school year.

State Efforts

There are many ongoing state reading initiatives. While they vary in approach, scope, and success, most share similar instructional concepts.

According to the Education Commission of the States (2001), the most common strategies used by state programs are "1) preventing and intervening with reading difficulties; 2) imposing consequences for students who do not meet reading standards; 3) promoting or mandating particular reading approaches or programs; 4) providing additional or better data; 5) providing teachers with skills and knowledge; 6) setting standards, developing reading plans; and 7) assessing readiness for school."

One of the state efforts is the Texas Reading Initiative. Now in its fourth year, the initiative utilizes a scientific research-based, multi-pronged approach that aims to have all children reading at or above grade level by their third-grade year. The program consists of six major components:

1. *Leadership development.* A key element of the state's professional development efforts is the use of Teacher Reading Academies—intensive, four-day training sessions on scientific research-based reading instruction, for kindergarten and 1st-grade teachers.
2. *Diagnostic assessment.* The Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) is the primary instrument used to test K-2 students. It measures ability in the areas of print awareness, phonemic awareness, graphophonemic knowledge, oral reading ability, and reading comprehension skills.
3. *Comprehensive research-based programs.* The state's reading instruction program focuses on oral language, reading, and writing, and emphasizes phonemic awareness, concepts of print, decoding, comprehension strategies, literary response/analysis, inquiry/research, writing to learn, and grammar and spelling.
4. *Intermediate intervention.* Students identified as struggling readers are placed in accelerated reading programs, and receive an additional 30 minutes of interventional instruction by specially trained teachers.
5. *Progress monitoring.* Teachers assess individual students' reading performance on an ongoing basis, and provide differentiated instruction that allows them to proceed and succeed at their own pace.
6. *End-of-year performance analysis.* Student performance is monitored annually via the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and other district-approved assessment instruments.

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Another state effort is the Alabama Reading Initiative, gun in 1997, when more than 97,000 of the state's third- rough eleventh-grade students scored in the lowest arter of the nation in reading. The resulting strategy for provement is scientifically-based and focuses on three eas. The first, Beginning Reading, emphasizes develop- ent of phonemic awareness and systematic teaching of nguage decoding skills. The second, Expanding Reading wer, aims to maintain high literacy levels in middle and gh school students through ongoing vocabulary velopment, increased reading, and building explicit links tween reading and writing. Alabama's third area of cus is Effective Intervention, which identifies and ovides specialized instruction for children who are ading below grade level.

An evaluation of the Alabama program, conducted in its cond year, showed that students in the participating hools had already made gains on the Stanford reading st. Additionally, teachers in the participating schools ported a number of positive changes—including improved udent and teacher attitudes.

Other state programs include:

The South Carolina Reading Initiative. This state's program, a three-year initiative, utilizes district and regional literacy coaches to provide onsite administrators and teachers with support and direction.

The Oregon Reading Initiative: Reading Together! Oregon's plan emphasizes teacher development, calling for higher standards to prepare new teachers and state institutes to train teachers in reading strategies. It also stresses family and community involvement and manageable class size as key factors.

ofessional Organizations' Efforts

In addition to federal and state programs, a number of eracy initiatives have been launched by independent nprofit organizations. Some examples are listed below.

Success for All is a literacy program premised on the belief that every child can read. Based on studies in reading and cooperative learning, it emphasizes oral reading by both teachers and students, discussion, story retelling, and a host of cooperative reading and writing activities. Since its inception in 1987, Success for All has grown to include some 1,500 schools in 47 states. It focuses on disadvantaged and at-risk students, serving primarily high-poverty Title I schools.

Children's Literacy Initiative (CLI) is also aimed at boosting the reading skills of children from low-income homes. The program centers around professional development for K-3 teachers, beginning with a three-day training institute and following up with one-on-one, onsite coaching. Some studies on the effectiveness of CLI indicate that the program results in improved reading and vocabulary test performance for participating students (Children's Literacy Initiative, 2000).

The NCTE Reading Initiative is an intensive, three-year professional development program offered by the National Council of Teachers of English. The initiative is based on "insights from school change research; the learning potential of inquiry-based, constructivist theories for learners of all ages; and the trans-disciplinary knowledge base on literacy and literacy instruction" (NCTE, 2000).

- *Born to Read* is a three-year national demonstration project conducted by the American Library Association. It is designed to create a model for partnership between library workers and health care providers, with the goal of teaching new and expectant at-risk parents to "raise readers." There are currently five libraries functioning as demonstration sites for the program.

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